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CAPITOL SPOTLIGHT
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SOVIET JEWS AND THE NEW TERROR

The Soviet Union has entered a period of severe political repression unparalleled since the worst years of Stalin's dictatorship. As might be expected, Soviet Jews are especially badly affected by recent changes.

Many of the two and a half million Jews in the Soviet Union are subject to persecution under any one of at least three different categories. Those treated most severely are Jews who seek to include aspects of their ethnic heritage in their everyday life. It does not matter to the regime if the Jews are nationalists studying Hebrew, Zionists trying to learn more about Israel, or traditional Jews trying to observe Shabbat or Kashrut.

Secondly, in the Soviet Union--as in almost every other country--Jews are substantially over-represented in the ranks of "liberal humanitarians". Many of the key figures in the Soviet human rights movement led by Andrei Sakharov are Jews. Jewish "liberals" are often punished both for their religious background and for their political views. (We find this same pattern of the double guilt assigned to Jewish liberals in such diverse places as the old Jim Crow American South, South Africa, and Jacobo Timerman's Argentina.)

Finally, all Jews--no matter how careful they may be to avoid every sign of Jewishness--are vulnerable to traditional Russian anti-Semitism. We must remember that long before the Communists came to power, vicious anti-Semitism was endemic to Russian society. The Communists have preserved and sometimes enhanced this ancient tradition.

One development dramatically portrays the intensification of Soviet repression. Under a new law, inmates of prisons and labor camps are now subject to a routine extension of their sentences from three to five years. Prison and camp authorities no longer have to go through the motions of satisfying the flimsy demands of the Soviet courts. The warden, acting as prosecutor, judge, and jury need simply conclude that an inmate has "violated rules". This bland phrase has unlimited elasticity on the Gulag.

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The extension of confinement for five additional years is automatically mandated for "violation of rules" by prisoners who have served time in solitary confinement. Virtually all prisoners of conscience--those whose "crimes" involve beliefs, ideas, or dissent--serve some time in solitary. The solitary cell called the shizo has been described by former inmates quoted in the Los Angeles Times as "damp, cold, insect-ridden concrete rooms furnished with a steel or wooden bench and a bucket for a toilet".

No outsider can calculate the scope of the Gulag Archipelago. The U.S. Government estimates that about four million Soviets live in some kind of forced labor setting. At least ten thousand are prisoners of conscience.

The people of the Soviet Union live in terror. The Jewish community lives in an especially severe form of terror. What is terror? Terror is not being apprehended for violation of the law and being punished--even executed--for that crime. Terror is living day-in-and-day-out without ever knowing which friend, neighbor, or even relative may not advance himself or save himself by lying about you. Terror is counting the days to the end of a seven year prison term, fearing each second that an arbitrary decision will extend your imprisonment.

Our first concern in thinking about the Soviet Union must be reducing the risk of nuclear war. Our second concern must be the reduction of terror within the U.S.S.R. I feel very deeply that these two goals are altogether compatible and, indeed, complementary.

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